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Abstract

The conductor announces an abrupt change in plans: the train will become an express. Effective now.

Keywords

tango, dance, train, commute, sketch



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Quick, Quick, Slow

by Matthew Pitt

The conductor announces an abrupt change in plans: the train will become an express. Effective now.

That's good, thinks Aileen; the quicker the ride the better. The fewer people, more to the point, on the ride, the better. It is not pure privacy Aileen is after: She simply prefers to ride away from her workplace in a train uncluttered enough to let her look fully at one face or object, not fuzzily at everything. During most commutes home, overcoats blur into rolling luggage blur into brightly colored shopping bags like bird wings at rest, all making her dizzy, cross—snow-blinded by the countless sights.

The subway car empties somewhat after the announcement. Clusters of teens tangle through small spaces, bumping and banging with anger so astonishing it seems to Aileen almost religious. They offer no apologies. And they take delight in the damage they cause. Aileen watches a man in gabardine check his watch. He seethes. When a local arrives on the platform's other side, he storms off. Muttering a valedictory stream of curses. Pushing past someone tugging a stroller filled with cans. Soda cans inside plastic bags, plastic just thick enough to conceal the brands. Aileen places her sketchbook on the empty seat beside her, where a slight woman,

whose hair was collected within a cornflower blue rag, had sat until the announcement. Aileen conjures the memory of that slight woman's face. How her two jagged front teeth overlapped slightly. How the bend in her elbow looked as she covered those teeth, as she tried in vain to stifle a yawn: dark and focused, like a knot in wood.

Aileen understands, even while recalling this picture, that she is losing her fight to contain it; somehow, her memory will dismiss the contours and outlines before it can place them on the sketchpad.

The conductor yells *Stand clear* after the doors begin closing shut.

He waits until the doors are secured before announcing for a second time that his local has transformed into an express, as though letting the riders in on some narrow giddy secret he wants to withhold from those still on the platform.

The train leisurely gathers momentum. It nags, creakily it curves, it buckles slightly left as it gives way to the lead of a new track. Aileen takes in the sweep of people. On her right is a boy of nine, seated on his knees. He wears wrinkled trousers, and with each livid turn of the train, happily slips to one side or the other. He relishes the slipping, this lack of control. A woman catty-cornered from Aileen wearing red tube socks and spangled cotton pants stretches her legs across two seats. She tends to her black hair — frizzed in back from the humidity, and jagged at the crown. She licks her fingers, nearly down to the palm, then brushes them through the bangs, trying to flatten and gel her many curls, calm the frizzes. She continues in this manner, stopping in spots, focusing on one section at a time. Several minutes pass before she finishes, though Aileen cannot truthfully discern a difference between the hair as it is, and was before the efforts to control it. But the woman must be satisfied with the change, because she returns her hands to their prior job—bending flat the spine of a paperback. A mystery. Who is Aileen to deny the woman her wisdom in this matter? Only one admirer.

Suddenly the train grinds against the track. Electricity spits. A noise like popping knuckles. This noise startles one woman, who was asleep but is now shocked awake. She uncrosses her legs, favors her jaw, tries to make herself calm.

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Two teen-aged boys stand across from this woman. Though they're swerving back and forth, they are making every effort to keep their hands in their pockets, and to not hold the looped leather straps above them. When the woman uncrossed her legs, her skirt opened up. The boys had a clear view. One looks at the other. Both laugh huskily. Louder. Back and forth. Rhythm of a saw through timber. Their decibels push at the woman. She tugs her hemline. Her fingers twitch. Her husband, standing close, tries to ignore his bit role in the scene by reading twice each ad and signpost whose words are near enough to discern. It is bad theater.

Maybe it is exhaustion—dry and hard like an apple core. Maybe Aileen finds herself sharing somehow the woman's humiliation. Maybe she is simply tired of faces. Whichever of these and regardless of all, Aileen drops her head and gazes deeply at the train floor. She holds her head still in one place for a long while, embracing the sights of broken candy pieces mashed on the tiles, and desiccated mud specks. It feels to Aileen this is where her gaze must go. *You're lucky to be in the city*, a friend often reminds Aileen, *your subject matter marching up to you each day*. But she never feels comfortable drawing what insists on its importance. In most instances, when she has an urge to sketch—a skeleton of that urge is dancing before her now—she has to wait until something distracts her from what she originally coveted. However, just as she is about to crease her hand along her sketchbook's spiral rings, she finds herself distracted by the feet of the man nearest to her. A Hasidic Jew. A Hasidic Jew's feet, foot, left foot. Once flat, now arched, its weight is shifted slightly to the ball. He has done this maybe to read at a better angle the corner of his newspaper. That doesn't concern Aileen. What moves her now, as her eyes perform a conscious sweep of the subway platform, is this revelation: before her are a handful of people standing, and they are standing in a way, and grouped exactly in a way, to mirror and form the first five steps of a tango.

The car lights shake. Falter. Fail. We're stuck in the dark, stuck in the dark, exclaims the little boy on his knees. Aileen refuses to believe this. The light has to come back on. Aileen has to continue watching the floor exercise, the participants...

There. The electricity resumes.

She returns to her gaze. It's true. Each foot and position is exactly as it should be. In back of the car, a young girl wearing a soccer shirt, green

trim on gold background, starts off. She leads. Her left foot stretches just ahead of her right. She is looking down at her left shoe, inspecting a pink ribbon she tied earlier into the lace. Her father holds her from behind by the waist, as though he doesn't want her involved. Too late. Just in front of the girl are two Latino men; the right foot of the first is lunging forward to complete the second step. His meaty hands casually press the train car wall. He is going over the city on this wall, talking Spanish slang back and forth with his friend. His friend at one point calls him Carlos. Carlos's friend is in a soft cast, and he leans out his left leg—the third step—to make it as visible as possible so it won't get trampled on. He clings to Carlos, glaring at others in spiteful darts. If any of the passengers call him a fag, he will take his beer bottle and crack it into an instant weapon. Carlos keeps mouthing off and pointing to the map. He avoids touching the woman seated in front of the map, though it's clear he would like to touch her. There is a little froth in Carlos's last comment to his friend. Aileen guesses they're arguing over where they should get off. It strikes Aileen that there is no humor in the way they fight. How many more quarrels can their friendship endure? Aileen skims past them: to the fourth dancer, a drowsy woman, just over or under sixty, enduring heavy sacks of groceries, with lips even as two stacked saucers. She stands with a wide base, pivoting left, to keep it all from spilling out. All the dancers lean toward the Hasidic Jew, who still trusts his weight to the ball of his left foot. Their feet, these feet.

Then the picture breaks.

The young girl spins free from her father's grasp. The man in the cast decides to leave without Carlos. He rumbles for the door, repeating the words, *Cripple coming through, pardon. Pardon, please.*

Why has it broken?

Has Aileen missed something? Yes. The train has stopped. Grunted to a full halt. Some passengers leave, others arrive, and all these people stir and shape into new constellations. Pretty ones, but nothing like before. And Aileen is left. To the next stop. And to wonder—could it ever happen that way? Does the Hasidic Jew know the dance; has the girl in the soccer shirt even heard of it? Could the drowsy woman summon the energy to take her step in time to the beat? Would Carlos and friend ever agree to dance together, even in conditions perfect as this? Who can know? The train

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stopped too soon, killing the tango, the doors opened, allowing the dancers to walk away without realizing they were partners. Aileen hears the conductor's preamble about the next destination, and knows she's lost the moment: even grace is known to bolt in this city, hastily hop trains if you turn your back to its arrival.

Matthew Pitt is author of Attention Please Now, a story collection that won the Autumn House Fiction Prize. His work has been published in Southern Review, Cincinnati Review, Oxford American, and Best New American Voices. Playing on his iPod as he types this: Bjork's "Earth Intruders".

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